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NSA Review Completed

October 19, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR DR. KISSINGER

FROM: John H. Holdridge

SUBJECT: CIA Study: Prospects For The Dry Season In Laos

Attached is an October 8 CIA study on Hanoi's possible outlook toward the dry season situation in Laos. It makes these main points:

--CIA believes that Hanoi's basic strategy for Laos remains generally unaltered. It is a defensive strategy designed to protect the infiltration routes to South Vietnam and vital areas in the north.

--The new element in the situation this year is that Southern Laos has assumed greater importance to the Communists because of developments in Cambodia.

--The situation remains unclear in Northern Laos. Based on an inventory of military resources available, the Communists are now in a better position to attack and perhaps take Long Tieng or Luang Prabang.

--Other factors, however, suggest the Communists may wish to keep military activity in Northern Laos at about the same level through the dry season as obtained prior to 1969. The Communists effort to get Souvanna to the negotiating table could be an indication that they wish to avoid costly hostilities in Northern Laos during the winter dry season.

--An end to U.S. bombing presumably remains their primary objective, but they might also be seeking to reduce ground combat in Northern Laos in order to free manpower to be applied to more important objectives elsewhere in Indo-China. They could have in mind proposing a cease fire in Northern Laos.

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--The Communists are as wary of Vang Pao's intentions in the Plaine des Jarres as he is of theirs with respect to Long Tieng. Both remain sensitive to opportunities afforded by appearances of weakness on the other side. The Thai forces, particularly the artillery batteries, remain crucial to Long Tieng's defense.

--"What is clear is that the guerillas (Vang Pao and the Meo) in the north have been engaged in an increasingly bitter and costly war of attrition that they cannot win."

--A major buildup of Communist forces is now under way in South Laos which combined with RLG and U. S. plans to harass infiltration routes almost certainly guarantees a greater volume of military actions in this area during the upcoming dry season.

--The magnitude of the Communist buildup in Southern Laos does not appear to be commensurate to the degree of harassment and raises the threat of a major and sustained offensive directed westward against Lao government forces and positions as well as the SGU's. As of early October as many as 20-25 thousand North Vietnamese have been deployed or are on their way into Southern Laos.

--Numerous indications and communications intelligence and collateral reporting suggest that the Communists will open the dry season in the panhandle with an attack on Paksong. This raises the possibility that the Communists will threaten the major towns on the Mekong especially Pakse and Thakhek. This could create a major crisis in Vientiane and headlines around the world, especially Washington.

--There is no evidence that this move is under way, but the dangers of it taking place are assessed by CIA as more than theoretical due to increased Communist capability in the area.

This is a good paper which lays out the problem clearly. My observations on it follow:

--The North Vietnamese now have great military strength in Southern Laos but this does not necessarily presage an attack on Cambodia.

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--We should anticipate the application by the North Vietnamese of substantial forces to counter our harassment of Communist LOCs in Southern Laos.

--Both present and projected FAR and SGU strength (including Cambodian SGUs) will be inadequate to counter this major Communist threat. Our efforts on the ground in South Laos will probably not be able to deter the North Vietnamese in the area, though this does not necessarily presage an attack on major Mekong cities.

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--In the light of the foregoing, friendly air interdiction attacks on Communist LOCs in Southern Laos will assume an even more important role this winter than heretofore.

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